

## A Few Notes On The Use Of Singing And Music In The ESL Classroom

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### Abstract

Singing can be a useful and enjoyable classroom activity for language students, with numerous benefits including reading practice, pronunciation, phrasing, and memorization. This paper includes a number of personal observations and opinions concerning the use of singing in class, as well as potentially useful details of my own classroom procedures and methods. The Addenda lists possible song choices, and also a small selection of song lyrics.

Key Words : Singing, Music, ESL

Music has been called “the universal language.” It was the “universal language of mankind,” to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and, moreover, “the speech of angels” to Thomas Carlyle, writing in the 19th century. (George Bernard Shaw, on the other hand, quipped that “Hell is full of musical amateurs: music is the brandy of the damned.”) Folklore even accords it the power to tame savage beasts, but the famous and oft-misquoted line, by William Congreve, says only that “Music hath charms to soothe a savage *breast*,” (italics mine,) although he continues with the claim that it has the power “to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.” These last two seem like sheer hyperbole, but perhaps he was thinking of extremely high volumes.

In any event, music is a universal cultural

phenomenon, one of the hallmarks of humanity, which we experience, if not enjoy, on a daily basis.

The word “music” itself derives from the Ancient Greek, *μουσική* (“mousike,”) which means “the art of the Muses,” who were a trio of goddesses. There were, incidentally, only three original members: Aoide, (“song” or “voice”), Melete, (“practice” or “occasion”), and Mneme, (“memory.”) (The group was later expanded to include six more goddesses embodying various arts, presumably because they were so popular.) This history is not directly related to the point of teaching Modern English, but it is interesting to consider that those goddesses, of voice, practice, and memory, are all familiar and useful “categories” in the language classroom.

More to the point at hand, music, specifically

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singing, is a basic form of communication, in a sense “equal” to speech. Musical rhythm is thought by some researchers to have been a precursor to glottogony (the origin of language, or the beginning of the human ability to use language.) So it may well be that music predates speech as a form of human communication, which is an interesting pre-historical question. (Charles Darwin even weighed in on this one in “Origin of Species,” proposing that music was a part of courtship rituals for proto-humans as well as birds.)

Certainly, in our own personal pre-historic eras, most, if not all, human beings first learn language through “baby talk” (sometimes called “Motherese” in Academic Journalese,) and nursery rhymes, (and there are those who believe that infants first learn language through rhythm and melody.)

This original, native language acquisition may be more to the point in the case of foreign language studies, and in any event it is not necessary to mark so great a distinction between singing and speech. It may not be too much to say that singing is a form of speech, (or, alternately, speech a form of singing,) but the main thing is that music is an important part of our lives which we may take for granted, and it may be a very useful tool that we can use for teaching.

So while music may be by turns soothing or stirring, inspirational or soporific, while it may encompass a fascinating history, and while “pure” music is as much a form of communication as verbal language or, for that matter, cave paintings, I am mainly concerned here not with music itself as a topic, but most specifically with the use of songs and singing, in the classroom, for the purpose of teaching English as a Second Language.

It is worth considering, for a moment, why anyone studies a language anyway, if they are not living in a place where the language is spoken. It’s not so easy for most people, particularly when they are not “immersed” in the language, and, frankly, there’s not really so much economic demand for bi- or, much less, multilingual ability. Some, but not so much, relative to the popularity of foreign language studies. (There is, particularly in Japan, some greater employment benefit related to English aptitude, but in most places this is not the case.)

I would put it down to a few things-- the sheer pleasure of learning, of knowledge gained, and also the laudable wish to communicate, good for private individuals and whole cultures as well-- and there is a kind of idealism and even nobility to this, and I not only approve, I am truly honored to have some part in it. It is one reason why, as a teacher, I want to “do a good job,” and it’s why I spend some time thinking about how to do a better job.

Based on my twenty years of teaching experience, with all grade levels and age levels, I would say that, compared with any other course of study, language students must be engaged in the material. They must be interested in what is happening, and must actively participate in order to get anything at all out of the class. Otherwise, a foreign language is just noise.

One problem is that the traditional classroom environment is not always exactly optimal for learning language. For multiplication tables, the periodic table of the elements, paleolinguistics and non-applied economics, the classroom or lecture hall is certainly the right place. But language acquisition is different from other kinds of studies, and is “naturally” occurring in the “real” world. Many-- most-- texts attempt to address this by using “personal” dialogues and

more-or-less generic “conversations,” all of which are fine, all of which are sometimes useful.

Another, related, issue is that regular school “programs” and “courses” are just that, often focused on workbooks and textbooks, offering a coherent, logical, step-by-step presentation that, in my opinion, and experience, doesn’t always work, or doesn’t work best. (There is recently a vogue for “content-based” English study, and the name alone suggests some “systemic” recognition of a problem.)

Why is this the case? Who knows? Habit, maybe, more than anything.

(I should, however, make it clear that this is in no way an indictment of traditional, typical studies, even of languages. There is a place for “pedagogical” material presentation, especially for general course outlines and goals, pronunciation and vocabulary, and even formal grammar for those who will use and benefit from it. Not to mention the correction of mistakes. We all pay teachers to make learning easier, and faster.

I should also say that, my sincere belief in the efficacy of singing aside, it is not a “magic” learning device, not a “shortcut.” Every few years a new “music-based” product or series appears on the market, all promising an “easy” and “fun” learning experience. Learning might be fun, but I don’t think it’s ever easy.)

Language studies are unique, and require unique strategies for the teacher, and students as well.

My main point here, (after much fanfare,) is that in my classes, no single activity has been as effective or useful as simply singing. It’s a great way to get students involved, and I would recommend it for almost any class, from pre-school toddlers to business executives. I’d like to

note a few reasons I think this is so, and then detail my “method” or techniques, such as they are.

Most important, I think, is the “comfort” factor of musical material. For native speakers as well as ESL learners, songs are less intimidating than other texts. Songs are, generally, meant to entertain and delight, and they are generally immediately “accessible,” and simpler than “literary” texts. In many cases, the students already know the material, and I always encourage them to choose songs to try. I find that this is especially good for establishing a habit of focusing on the text at hand-- and providing a clear purpose for it.

Working on a song is also “purpose-driven”-- doing the song well or “right” is an end in itself, and gives students a sense of accomplishment or “mastery.”

Singing is also a non-competitive group activity, and I find it to be good for classroom “cohesion,” creating a situation where we are all working together on the same thing.

It is worth mentioning that singing songs is also a form of participation in the actual culture, a sharing of a common, even near-universal, cultural experience. To be a native English speaker is to know “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” as well as “To be, or not to be?” In this sense, singing can also be a way to “open” culture and history to students.

A smaller, but significant point is that the voice is, so to speak, a muscle, and basic speaking ability improves with practice of any kind, in the native as well as the second language-- a not inconsequential side-benefit. “Laryngeal training.” (And, as an aside, I would recommend vocal training for any teacher, as a way to improve their performance.)

Beside these “general” benefits of singing are

a few more specific ones:

Singing can be an effective aid to memory, as with rhythmic mnemonics (“In Fourteen-hundred and ninety-two...”) And while I am not interested here in citations and research per se, there are a few interesting studies that suggest that a musical or melodic cue does *not* help with longer-term memorizing. Short-term, quite possibly, but after a few weeks, maybe not.

Singing is often very good for practicing elisions and “native” speech patterns, and may have the benefit of possible accent reduction or elimination (the famous example that many stutterers don’t stutter when they sing.) This is not always the case, but it can be helpful.

Songs may also feature some useful vocabulary, (although not as much as one might think, particularly slang-rich genres such as rap. Still, “sayings” and proverbs, idioms, slang and “profanity” are, perhaps, where languages “live,” so they should not be avoided.)

Finally, it’s just plain fun, and that can make a big difference to any student, at any level.

So here’s what I usually do: I hand out a copy of the lyrics, and occasionally we read it aloud first, usually not. Often I’ll give the students an idea of the melody, then we “count in”-- “One and two and three...” And then we sing. Faster? Slower? Louder? Softer? Ad libidum, as the musical term says.

I always emphasize that this exercise is their practice, not my performance, particularly if they are not singing loud enough.

When we’ve finished, it’s sometimes fun to pretend it was a show. (Give yourselves a hand! Applause, applause! Take a bow! Wait, they’re still cheering! Encore?)

There are a few more useful exercises that I usually use:

Sing a note together, sing a scale up and down, sing triads (three notes of a chord, if you know what that is.) These are basic vocal warm-ups. (As are “tongue twisters,” also useful.)

Separating the class into two or more groups can be good, and good for “directions.”

Rounds, three-part overlapping harmonies, are great-- I almost always do “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.”

I don’t use solos so much, but sometimes students like to try it, which is great.

The ability to play an instrument is useful. I prefer the ukulele for a number of reasons. It’s a small instrument, easy to carry, but the best points are that it is not so loud, and in some ways it can be considered a “percussive” instrument, certainly mainly a rhythm instrument. Guitar is another “natural” choice, but I find a guitar to be slightly intimidating, somehow, loud and large. In this situation the instrument should be “neutral,” really. The keyed zither or “autoharp” was popular a generation ago in American music classes, and that could be a good accompaniment.

But, really, a capella, unaccompanied singing is just fine. (Although one might consider using a pitch-pipe or a harmonica to keep everyone close to the same key.)

I have never tried using drums or percussion, but that would be fun and it could be useful.

I’ve used pre-recorded “karaoke” tracks (Japanese for “solo orchestra”) but I don’t like that so much-- I find that speed changes are useful, in order to emphasize words or phrases, and that a real instrument is quicker, and playing it more “personal,” as well, which may generate a kind of trust with the students. (As for audio-visual in general, frankly, I don’t like to fool around with equipment during limited

class time. The simpler the better, to me. But go ahead, use a soundtrack!)

Finally, a few other observations and related activities:

I always read through the text afterward-- not before-- targeting useful or interesting vocabulary or verbs (and sometimes mentioning “useless” or incorrect or nonsensical ones.) I definitely have students focus on it if there is some useful word or phrase.

I rarely tie the song to the “regular” lesson (except around holidays like Christmas,) but this may be useful for some, and I’ve known teachers who like to make music part of a themed lesson. (While I always explain to the class why we are singing in the first place, in some sense I still keep it as a “fun” or “bonus” activity, almost always at the end of the class. This is a form of salesmanship, and I think it works.)

I sometimes have a “quiz” or discussion about the topic of the song, as simple as “true or false.”

Students can write the “story” or situation of the song. (With any topic I find a little discussion, then writing, then a more detailed discussion, then rewriting, to be best.)

Listen to the original recorded song. (But I only rarely do this, although I know plenty of teachers who use recorded music and film quite effectively.) One great activity is to give the students the lyrics with some of the words missing, then have them listen and fill those in.

Find the top hits of today. Your students

probably know them. Talk about those.

Talk about performers and bands your students like, and perhaps about historical composers and different genres of music.

Find out if anybody plays any instruments, or what instrument they would like to play. Do any of their friends or family play instruments?

If the class were to put on a show, what costumes would be good? How about choreography and lighting? Are we ready to tour? This may seem to be getting a bit far afield, but it is just to say that there’s a lot of room for discussion.

In conclusion, singing is one of the simplest and most effective techniques that an ESL or EFL teacher can use. It’s easy and fun, and useful in any number of ways. Give it a try!

#### ADDENDA

The following is a “suggested” song list, which is to say a selection of songs I have found popular with students and “useful” for various reasons. The lyrics to these are readily available on the internet or in music books. Don’t worry about any legalities here: it is perfectly legal to use copywritten material for educational purposes.

This is a short list, and for a regular university semester of 15 or so weeks I usually end up doing some Abba or Jackson 5 or whatever is requested-- recently, Lady Gaga and Avril Lavigne.

(These are roughly organized into the “simplest” nursery rhymes and lullabies, traditional “folk” songs and “gospel/spirituals,” “campfire” songs, “pop” songs, songs from films, and, finally, carols.)

Happy Birthday (To You)

“ABC” Song

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Amazing Grace

You Are My Sunshine

This Land Is Your Land

Home On The Range

Stand By Me

Country Roads

Top Of The World

Yesterday

Yellow Submarine

Somewhere Over The Rainbow

Doe, A Deer

What A Wonderful World

It's A Small World

Chim Chim Cheree

Greensleeves

Jingle Bells

Silent Night

Auld Lang Syne

Also, and finally, here are a few “classic” lyrics:

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder  
what you are. Up above the world so high, Like  
a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle, little  
star, How I wonder what you are!

When the blazing sun is gone, When there's  
nothing he shines upon, Then you show your lit-  
tle light, Twinkle, twinkle, through the night.  
Twinkle, twinkle, little star, How I wonder  
what you are!

In the dark blue sky so deep Through my cur-  
tains often peep For you never close your eyes  
Til the morning sun does rise Twinkle, twinkle,  
little star How I wonder what you are

Twinkle, twinkle, little star How I wonder what  
you are

Row, Row, Row Your Boat

Row, row, row your boat,

Gently down the stream.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,

Life is but a dream.

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That  
saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now  
am found, Was blind, but now I see.

T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear. And  
Grace, my fears relieved. How precious did that  
Grace appear The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils and snares I have  
already come; 'Tis Grace that brought me safe  
thus far and Grace will lead me home.

When we've been here ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun. We've no less days to  
sing God's praise Than when we've first begun.

You Are My Sunshine

You Are My Sunshine

My only sunshine.

You make me happy

When skies are grey.

You'll never know, dear,

How much I love you.

Please don't take my sunshine away

The other nite, dear,

As I lay sleeping  
 I dreamed I held you in my arms.  
 When I awoke, dear,  
 I was mistaken  
 And I hung my head and cried.

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,  
 How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

I'll always love you  
 And make you happy  
 If you will only say the same  
 But if you leave me  
 To love another  
 You'll regret it all some day;

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,  
 How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

You told me once, dear  
 You really loved me  
 And no one else could come between  
 But now you've left me  
 And love another  
 You have shattered all my dreams;

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,

How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

Louisiana my Louisiana  
 the place where I was borne.  
 White fields of cotton  
 -- green fields clover,  
 the best fishing  
 and long tall corn;

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,  
 How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

Crawfish gumbo and jambalaya  
 the biggest shrimp and sugar cane,  
 the finest oysters  
 and sweet strawberries  
 from Toledo Bend to New Orleans;

You are my sunshine,  
 My only sunshine.  
 You make me happy  
 When skies are grey.  
 You'll never know, dear,  
 How much I love you.  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

#### Jingle Bells

Dashing through the snow  
 In a one horse open sleigh  
 O'er the fields we go  
 Laughing all the way  
 Bells on bob tails ring  
 Making spirits bright  
 What fun it is to laugh and sing

A sleighing song tonight

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh  
Jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh

A day or two ago  
I thought I'd take a ride  
And soon Miss Fanny Bright  
Was seated by my side  
The horse was lean and lank  
Misfortune seemed his lot  
We got into a drifted bank  
And then we got upsot

Oh, jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh  
Jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh yeah

Jingle bells, jingle bells  
Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh  
Jingle bells, jingle bells

Jingle all the way  
Oh, what fun it is to ride  
In a one horse open sleigh

#### Auld Lang Syne

Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and never  
brought to mind? Should auld acquaintance be  
forgot, and auld lang syne?

#### CHORUS:

For auld lang syne, my jo,  
for auld lang syne,  
we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.  
And surely ye'll be your pint-stowp ! and surely  
I'll be mine ! And we'll tak a cup o' kindness yet,  
for auld lang syne.

#### CHORUS

We twa hae run about the braes, and pu'd the  
gowans fine; But we've wander'd mony a weary  
fit, sin auld lang syne.

#### CHORUS

We twa hae paidl'd i' the burn, frae morning  
sun till dine; But seas between us braid hae  
roar'd sin auld lang syne.

#### CHORUS

And there's a hand, my trusty fiere ! and gie's a  
hand o' thine ! And we'll tak a right gude-willy  
waught, for auld lang syne.

#### CHORUS